

## *The Rule of Number Twenty*

The aroma of cream stew hung in the air as I arrived at the front door. On my mind was the young man from earlier. An interesting encounter it was, apparently I was his *number twenty*.

I heard him address me on my way back from the library past the station. ‘Hi! Good afternoon,’ were his initial words. When you’re getting on in years, you sometimes get such approaches from people with designs on your savings, and of course one can’t be too careful. Yet something about his voice was so pleasant I looked around and said hello back.

‘I’m ho-ome.’

Before heading up to my room, I poked my head into the kitchen.

‘Cream stew today, Dad.’

With that greeting Sakiko glanced in my direction – she was chopping something at the worktop – and a smile bloomed on her face. My wife and I fretted over her when she was a youngster – such a scrawny thing she was despite our efforts to feed her up. But now, nearly fifty, she had a figure showing ample curves.

‘Yes, I could tell by the smell,’ I said.

‘You just love your cream stew, don’t you?’

I smiled back, and she asked if I’d take my bath before dinner. I said it could wait. The chat with that young man meant I’d got home later than was my habit.

For six months or thereabouts I’d been living with my only daughter Sakiko and her husband Yosuke in a house they bought in a suburb of Tokyo. Concerned about my living alone as the years caught up with me, they invited me to move in. Now the old house in Sendai was up for sale. It was no easy task to find a buyer, and I expected I’d have to shave the asking price, but my plan was to take a little of the proceeds myself for my daily expenses, giving the rest to my daughter and son-in-law.

They let me have the compact room upstairs. On the other side of the landing was my eighteen-year-old grandson Natsuo – I took it he was back already given the music coming from his room. Having missed out on his preferred university, Natsuo was a bit sullen as the academic year began, though he soon perked up again. I guessed his plainspoken manner had come from his dad. While shy, there was a kindly side to him, and I reckoned he’d turned out a nice lad by today’s standards.

I entered my small traditional-style room, and the music was turned down slightly. That was my grandson's way of acknowledging my return.

I found myself at a loose end even though I was back in my room. No sooner had I made up my mind to go downstairs again than Sakiko came up to tell me that Yosuke had called. He was getting off work early and could join us at the dinner table for once. She asked if I minded waiting an extra thirty minutes or so to eat. 'Of course not,' I replied and decided to take my bath in the meantime.

Nice. My thoughts could turn to that young man before dinner. Submerged in bathwater, I recollected how he looked. At first, I'd taken him to be a high schooler, but it became clear he was more like twenty-two or twenty-three as the conversation progressed. Maybe being so personable made him seem younger. Handsome in that old-fashioned way, he reminded me of a clean-cut movie lead from the 1950s, though I had a hunch such a look didn't appeal much to girls anymore.

'May I take a little of your time?' the young man said. Uh-oh, a salesman or some religious bod, I thought, but I was inclined to stick around. It might be amusing to play along. That day at the library, the book I'd been after was fully reserved and unavailable. I was eager for a diversion. If appropriate, I could set him in the right direction perhaps.

He took me somewhere located in the department store by the station, a café I'd tried only once before. Such places were lacking in this neighbourhood even if it was Tokyo. Well, there was the odd café here and there, but nowhere served coffee like the one I'd frequented with my wife back in Sendai. Marooned in a row of clothes boutiques at the back of the second floor, the café in this department store had once struck me as highly promising from the outside, and I'd been lured through its doors. In the event, though, the coffee was a complete let-down. Nevertheless, I accompanied the young man without objecting since we weren't really going there for the drinks.

Both of us ordered coffee. I *Kilimanjaro*, the day's special, my companion *Blue Mountain*. ('What a waste of money,' I said to myself when he chose such a pricey bean in a place like this.) A silence then ensued as we waited for our drinks to come. I considered it was down to the young man to speak, while he had the air of someone unsure what to say first. Once the coffee arrived, I took a sip of mine and, after a grimace, encouraged him to begin.

'Well then...'

It was here the young man said, 'You're my number twenty you know.'

'Did you say *my*'?

‘That’s correct. I embarked on a count of twenty people at twenty years old, and today, finally, I reached my twentieth pick, which is you.’

This time I was the one at a loss for words, and I was reduced to simply grimacing again. It looked like he was indeed recruiting for some sect or other. Even so, I was in the mood to hear more.

‘Actually, a rule applies to number twenty,’ he said.

I came out dressed from the bathroom just as the front door opened and Yosuke arrived. After an exchange of greetings, he said sorry for delaying dinner and raised his hand apologetically. Such routines may be silly, but I knew he was the kind of guy who meant it when he apologised. My daughter found a nice partner. He was just right for her.

Once Natsuo had come down to join us – his mother having called his name three times – we could begin our evening meal. Laid out on the dinner table with a pot of steaming hot cream stew were butterbur sprouts (called *fuki*), Caprese salad, and what looked like stir-fried greens.

The white tablecloth had a rice ear motif in orange, black and a faded light blue. It may have been a new purchase, but something told me I’d seen this one before. Way before. In Sendai, when my wife was alive. Perhaps while she was helping me out with the disposal of the house, Sakiko decided it would come in handy.

Yosuke poured a beer into my glass – it was just the two of us drinking – after which Sakiko served up cream stew for me. ‘That mozzarella cheese is rather tasty, I must say,’ she said, pointing in the direction of the salad, and I helped myself to a piece.

‘So?’

‘Mmm, delicious.’

‘Isn’t it? I got it online – mozzarella made in Hokkaido. And how about the stew?’

I guided a spoonful of cream stew between my lips. Once again, I said it was delicious.

‘I think it’s a fine effort, but it can’t measure up to mum’s I suppose,’ Sakiko said. ‘Or at least, mine isn’t really the same – wouldn’t you say, Dad?’

Before I could hit on a response, Yosuke cut in: ‘It isn’t exactly complicated, is it? Making cream stew and that.’

‘Its very simplicity is why it comes out differently,’ explained Sakiko in a tone that implied her husband didn’t have much of a clue.

‘Oh... right,’ said Yosuke, yielding instantly. He resembled me, having minimal interest in culinary matters. Sakiko’s enthusiasm came from her mother.

‘Like the way the flour is cooked when making a thickener for it, that sort of thing,’ she added.

‘Wait, doesn’t the thickener come out of a packet?’

Here Yosuke had dropped a clanger, as I was once prone to. ‘Oh, honestly!’ said Sakiko in exasperation, just as her mother used to.

I felt wryly amused, though not at Yosuke’s expense. The fact was I had no special fondness for cream stew. If anyone did, it was my wife. More exactly, what she truly seemed to enjoy was making it, and since she would ask for my verdict on those occasions, I’d tell her how good it was. Over time, the perception took hold in our house that cream stew was a favourite dish of mine.

‘Cream stew is nice and everything,’ – it was Natsuo joining in with the table talk, he must have felt it was time to chip in – ‘but give me curry any day.’

‘Oh, honestly!’ said Sakiko for a second time. Yet the affection in which she held her family shone through in her voice. What a relief it would be if I could speak out as my grandson had done, I thought.

Yosuke was polite enough to ask if I’d been to the library again, and I confirmed I had. However, my failure to get the book I wanted would have made for tame conversation. Instead, I decided to bring up the encounter with the young man.

‘Something curious happened today. I was invited to take part in what’s called the *rule of number twenty*.’

The idea, as explained by the young man, is to tally twenty people you rate a ‘pick’ as you go about your daily routine, engaging with the final choice in order to pass the baton.

‘People you rate a pick?’ I asked him first off. There was background music playing in the café, a piano arrangement of *Yesterday*.

‘Those who catch your eye. Who spark your interest. Who cry out to be tallied. Literally, those who make you think, *This one*. But you’re restricted to choosing people who aren’t friends or family. And someone of celebrity status is unacceptable. If you realise later that was the reason for your pick, it should be discounted.’

‘You don’t speak with the first nineteen then?’

‘No, you just count them in your head if it’s not number twenty.’

‘And you counted nineteen people that way?’

‘That’s right. It’s taken me three years from the age of twenty before reaching my final pick, the one I could speak to.’

‘Three years!’

‘There isn’t a set timespan. You can take a week to choose your twenty, you can take a day. If a day is all you need for nineteen, but the last proves elusive for a whole year, that’s perfectly fine too.’

I recounted all this to my family at the dining table, a mix of questions I’d fired off to the young man and his responses. Having covered the essentials, I thought I explained it well enough.

‘Could be some cult,’ Yosuke said when I’d mostly done talking. He tilted a bottle of beer in my direction as a way of offering me another drink, but I declined. Not that I’m averse to alcohol, it was just that I couldn’t handle it well, and recently a single beer was enough to boost my appetite.

‘That’s what I thought at first,’ I said. ‘But it’s a game, not a cult.’

‘Even accepting that’s true, it would seem wise to avoid getting too involved in such things.’

‘There isn’t the least risk. The young man I mentioned didn’t try to get my name and address, and it was up to me whether to take part.’

As I spoke, it crossed my mind I hadn’t concerned myself with his name either, come to that.

‘Sounds like something from ages ago, doesn’t it?’ Sakiko said. ‘That chain letter claimed I’d be in for bad luck if I didn’t pass on copies to twenty people. So I went along with it.’

Ah, that’s right, I thought. She received the letter when six or seven years old. I’d tried explaining to her there was no need to do as it instructed, that she would only be making a nuisance of herself. ‘But then I’ll get bad luck!’ was her tearful reaction. My wife took me to task later, suggesting I should let Sakiko decide for herself what to do. That was at night, and we were alone in the bedroom. She was changing a pillowcase at the time. I could distinctly remember it had a blue floral pattern.

‘Wasn’t it more like ten rather than twenty? A real hassle that would be, writing twenty letters,’ Yosuke said in respect to the chain letter. Then he directed a question at me: ‘In that rule of yours, it’s the twentieth you speak to. Why that number?’

I was thrown a little off guard. Why would it be twenty indeed? Nothing came to mind, and I was struggling for an answer.

‘Well, it’s easier than the letters,’ I said. ‘For those first nineteen, at least, it’s all in your head.’

‘It’s easy to cheat too,’ Natsuo remarked.

‘Might the answer be that it started on the original player’s twentieth birthday. Or something like that maybe?’

This theory of Sakiko’s apparently satisfied Yosuke. ‘Makes sense,’ he said and left it at that.

Yesterday was followed by The Sound of Silence.

I mean the music that was playing in the café. Those songs were old favourites of mine, and I’d collected the records – I’d also picked up the Simon and Garfunkel CD – but simply tinkling the melody on a piano makes for a travesty of the original. Besides the bad coffee, it was another reason I’d resolved not to come again after my first visit – the music.

‘What I’m saying is pretty far out, I do know that,’ the young man said, my somewhat sour expression the likely cue.

‘Why did you get involved in... this rule of number twenty?’ I asked, to show my willingness to carry on with the conversation.

‘I was approached on the day of my twentieth birthday.’

Yes, that’s how he replied. In line with Sakiko’s theory about the rule’s creator.

‘It was a middle-aged lady of around forty who came up to me. Still, I was pleased in a way to be picked as her number twenty.’

‘Didn’t you suspect that lady was... a bit funny in the head, or some sort of grifter?’ I said, adding inwardly, ‘As you may well be yourself, of course.’

‘With something like this, you can kind of tell, can’t you? From their face or the way they’re speaking. What she said wasn’t crazy or deceitful I think. Besides, I couldn’t see that it mattered much if it was. Ultimately, whether you believe in this or not is up to you.’

There was a glint in the young man’s eye, and I wondered what I should take from that.

‘So why me then, an old man? Something about me caught your eye?’

‘Having noticed you, I had no other choice,’ he said with a chuckle, and I echoed his laugh. A good response, I thought. It wasn’t that I was picked for having ‘presence’ or some striking personal quality. I merely happened to be there, that’s all.

‘I’ve made my first pick already,’ I announced.

‘What sort of person?’

‘A girl... about thirteen...’

Oddly, I couldn't bring the girl clearly to mind while trying to answer Sakiko's question. Perhaps all this talk was taking its toll. I scooped up a piece of chicken with my spoon and let it drop back into the bowl. It wasn't just that this dish is nothing special, I realised. Actually, I didn't like it much.

'She came into the café. While he and I were still in there. In tow with her mother...' I said.

'Her mother didn't make it to your tally, I guess.'

'She didn't belong in it.'

Unable to form a distinct image in my head, I found it hard to string my words together. Natsuo glanced up with a surprised look.

'Hang on,' Yosuke said, having moved on from beer to saké. 'Didn't you say it was the place on the second floor a little earlier?' How he could knock it back alongside the stew was beyond me.

'Yes, at the back of the second floor of the department store. Rather a crummy place it is though.'

'But that café closed down a while back. It's a discount shop now, I believe.'

That gave me a jolt. Unless I was going to the café, I'd have no reason to be in that spot for trendy shoppers. I couldn't have set foot in there for quite some time, that's what it looked like.

At a loss for a reply, I gazed down at my bowl of stew.

'Dad, let me warm that up for you, in the saucepan.'

When I looked up at Sakiko, it dawned on me this girl of mine had known for a long time. Not only her – also my grandson, staring into space. And no doubt it was obvious day after day as they listened to me at dinner. What happened this evening was no one-off.

'I am right, aren't I?' Yosuke said quizzically, looking for his wife and son to concur. Of course, showing me up wasn't his intention. He just never had much opportunity before to sit with me at the dinner table.

'Guess I got mixed up,' I murmured.

'Dad, isn't your dinner cold by now?' Sakiko said, as though to head off a further comment from Yosuke.

'Uh, don't worry. I'll finish it off.'

I dipped my spoon into the stew once again. Mumbling his thanks, Natsuo rose from the table. I supposed this lad shared my wish to be somewhere else and so was making his escape. By the expression on his face, Yosuke still hadn't fully grasped what was going on.

I couldn't stand cream stew to tell the truth. Just a grilled fillet of salted salmon would have been fine by me. It felt like a suitable moment to come clean about that, indeed I could picture myself doing so. But in the end I soldiered on, chewing the cold chicken without a word.

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